



THE PROOF

By MATTI KOLEHMAINEN

The atmosphere of the country of lakes and forests and the mood of its people are captured in the following short story written by a rising member of the younger generation of Finnish writers.—K.M.

WHEN the steamer on board which Reino Koljonen had sailed from Newcastle approached the Finnish coast, and the low hills, luminous in the glow of the setting sun, raised their soft crests on the horizon, his heart throbbed so violently that it almost hurt.

Twelve years had passed since last he had seen the coast line of his country as he did now—only that then the hills in there had grown smaller and smaller, finally to disappear into the sea, while now they were getting bigger and bigger and coming closer all the time. Then it had been a sad, apprehensive farewell; now it was home-coming, after turbulent, toilsome years with much adversity and struggle in the distant lands across the sea.

Reino had been only fifteen when his mother took him away from home. He had not then fully understood why he and his mother had to leave, although he could not help feeling that relations between his mother and father—or rather his stepfather, for Osmo Peltola was his mother's second husband—were not quite what they should have been. Reino had never known his real father, who had died when Reino was a baby. Later, in America, where his mother settled with a sister of hers, she had told Reino the circumstances which had compelled her to leave their home and country.

Osmo Peltola was a hard, selfish man. Soon after her marriage, Reino's mother had already been made to feel that her husband regarded her only as a sort of servant whom he could treat as he pleased. With all her might she had tried to bring their matrimonial state into a more harmonious groove, but in vain: conditions only got worse as time went on and no children were born. The idea that the farm and all his property would, at his death, go to a son who was not his child, engendered a certain cruelty in the mind of this egoistic man, a cruelty which Reino was often made to feel. Finally there was nothing left for Reino's mother, but to leave, if she did not want to let herself be entirely broken and deliver her child up to a tyrant's caprice. She and the fifteen-year-old boy emigrated to America.

The memory of his mother made Reino Koljonen forget his surroundings for a while—the hills which were now cloaked in a blue-gray haze, the sea around him, and all the twinkling stars of heaven. She had not had an easy time. Her whole life had been a hopeless struggle against heavy odds. After three years in Quebec, she had died.

Since then Reino had wandered about in the States and Canada. Open-air life appealed much more to him than life in big cities. He was a typical nature-

lover; for no less than five and a half years he worked at the sawmills up in the forests of Northwest Canada. A lonely life it was, devoid of all the amusements and distractions which townspeople know and are so fond of. But he liked his way of living, and for a couple of years he shared the solitude with a countryman of his, Kaarlo Antikainen, who was the same age.

Kaarlo, whose looks bore a striking similarity to Reino's, was hardly the type of person with whom Reino would have associated under more home-like conditions; but the loneliness, and their distant mutual native land, made them confide in each other. When Kaarlo Antikainen had gone away after a while, Reino felt very lonesome and had already thought of returning to civilization. But Kaarlo suddenly turned up again. Their former friendship continued for some months—then Kaarlo disappeared again, and this time he did not come back.

Reino stayed in Canada for another year; then he could not stand it any longer and went down to the States. And there, at one of the Finnish Consulates, he learned that the Finnish authorities had been looking for him for some time, as he was the sole heir to the deceased Osmo Peltola.

AND now—now he was home again!

His whole being trembled with joy as he walked up through the valley in the sparkling morning sunshine. He sang. He now saw the world of his childhood as the Biblical emissaries must have seen the Promised Land. More beautiful than in any of the dreams of his exile were the green slopes, the emerald lake, the heath-covered plains, the forest, and the hills. And there, straight ahead, lay the dear old village—and the farm, his childhood home!

A cloud passed over his face for a moment. Now he came to think of it, it was not there, between the solid log houses, that his happy memories belonged. There Osmo Peltola, his stepfather, had

ruled. There his mother had suffered and struggled until life grew too difficult for her. And he himself, hadn't he always been afraid in the shadow of home? Only when he had been outside in the open air, on the hill slopes or on the banks of the lake, where he was free and where his friends were the birds in the sky, the bushes and the flowers, and the big boulders in the rushing waters of the river which he had known one by one and now recognized, only then had he felt happy and carefree.

There was the school—over there near the pine forest, just like in the good old days. No, not quite! Something was missing, or rather somebody: the schoolmaster Rinne's daughter, the blonde, curly-haired little girl who used to run about in the courtyard in front of the house. Where was Orvokki Rinne now, he wondered? She must have married long ago. Perhaps she was far away.

He and Orvokki had been such playmates! In spite of the fact that she was a girl and three years younger than he, he had always played with her a lot more than with anybody else. They had been in love with each other, in the manner of children. She was always the fairy princess, and he the prince; and when they sat at the edge of the lake, building castles in the air and making plans for the future, it was always a future together—they could not even imagine any alternative but that they would "belong to each other" when they grew up. Their parting, the day before he left with his mother, had been rich in both tears and promises. She promised faithfully to wait for him until he came back. And he—well, he was to work and toil, grow rich, and then return to take her away from the village.

Reino Koljonen smiled sadly. Both had, of course, forgotten their promises. After all, they had only been irresponsible children. But, nevertheless, there was something sweet and tender in these thoughts, something pure and innocent which had become estranged in his later life when the gold dust had been blown off the wings of his child-mind.

He had almost reached the village. From the farm, which was to be his as soon as he had proved who he was, men and horses were flocking out through the gate to begin work in the fields.

"Good morning," greeted the returning wanderer, lifting his cap.

"Good morning!" rang out the answer of those riding past as they turned to look after the stranger.

Reino crossed the courtyard and entered the kitchen, where the servants were busy clearing up after breakfast. They looked at the newcomer with inquisitive eyes.

"Can I see your master?" asked Reino.

One of the maids indicated by a nod that he could open the door at the end of a passage leading from the kitchen.

"Come in!" thundered a commanding voice as he knocked at the door.

Reino entered. In the center of the room stood a man with his hands in his pockets. Reino was speechless, he stared at the man completely unable to utter a word. It was impossible for him to do the least bit of thinking, his feet seemed rooted to the floor.

The man was Kaarlo Antikainen.

"Well, sir? What do you want?"

Not a muscle moved in his face.

"Kaarlo! *You?*" finally burst out of Reino; the unexpected situation in which he found himself continued to be so confusing that he could not make head or tail of it.

"Kaarlo, you say? You must be mistaken, my good man! I am not Kaarlo. My name is Reino Koljonen. I am the owner of this farm."

"You? You're crazy! What does all this mean?"

Kaarlo Antikainen laughed gruffly. "Are you really too stupid to grasp it? I am Reino Koljonen. On my return to Finland a long time ago, I verified my identity satisfactorily, and I have taken over the legacy which, according

to the will of my stepfather, Osmo Peltola, is my legitimate property!"

For another moment Reino stood quite motionless—then he leaped toward the other man: "Thief! Swindler!"

"Cool down!" Kaarlo Antikainen hastily retired behind the table. "Do you think you'll get anywhere by force? Take it easy—or I'll have a few of my men take care of you!"

Reino had stopped again. He saw that the other was right. Force would not help, it would only make things worse. The whole situation became clear to him in a flash. Over there, in Canada, he had initiated Kaarlo Antikainen into conditions at home down to the minutest detail. In the long, lonely evenings he had told him all about the events of his childhood, about relationships and friendships—he had disclosed everything without a thought of deceit. And then Kaarlo had left. At some consulate or other he had learned about the death of Osmo Peltola and the search for his stepson. He had made up his mind to risk the bold coup. He and Reino bore a sufficient resemblance. Who, after he was able to prove his identity satisfactorily, would ever think of exposing this identity to doubts and investigations? In order to obtain the necessary documents, he had returned to the remote place in Canada where Reino was living and had committed his theft without the slightest difficulty.

And now?

"You knew how to listen, Kaarlo."

"I always have been able to use my ears and eyes. But why talk about things of the past which cannot be altered?"

"You think I shall let you remain here on the farm posing as Reino Koljonen?"

The other shrugged his shoulders. "As a stranger without a name in this part of the country you ought to be wise enough not to try the impossible. What proof have you that is better than mine? And don't forget, mine has been officially recognized! Use your common sense!

Go back to America. I am willing to help you with money—I am not going to be stingy or narrow-minded.”

Reino stared in front of him as if it was impossible for him to understand what the other said. Then he burst out laughing:

“No, friend Kaarlo, you are not going to win this game that easily!” he exclaimed, suddenly serious again. “And I won’t let you win it at all! The truth has always been stronger than falsehood when the time was ripe. The truth will defeat you yet. If nothing else will testify in my favor, the sky, the earth, the hills, the forest, and the lake here in the district of my childhood will take on voices and say which of us is Reino Koljonen and which is a ruthless liar and swindler!”

Kaarlo’s eyes flickered with sudden fear, his face turned gray, but he pulled himself together and shouted: “So, you are trying to scare me, eh? Get out of here—or you’ll have to sleep in the constable’s jail tonight!”

As if in a drunken stupor, Reino walked back toward the lake where the constable’s farm lay. All sorts of thoughts whirled in his head. What a home-coming—what a terrible shock! What was worst was not that somebody had stolen his property but that his name, too, had been taken from him, that in some way he didn’t exist at all.

He suddenly noticed somebody walking toward him. It was a young woman in a simple, light-colored dress. Golden hair shone from under her bonnet, two limpid blue eyes were looking at him. He stopped.

“Orvokki!”

She, too, had stopped. Not fear, but a speechless bewilderment, a complete helplessness, showed in her pretty face.

“Don’t you recognize me?” he finally said.

She did not answer, just went on looking at him.

“I am Reino. I have come back. I know what has happened. Don’t you see it’s me?”

She stepped back when he approached her. Her eyes were full of tears. “But—but it can’t be!” she stammered. “Reino Koljonen has been home for more than a year! And you—you?”

“You are—*his*?” He nodded in the direction of the farm. She shook her head, still staring at him. “No, but he wants me to be—he always reminds me of the promise I gave him as a child.”

“It was to me you gave your promise, Orvokki! It was you and I who played by the river!”

“But he, too, has told me everything just as it was then—everything! I don’t understand. There is something about him which isn’t like the Reino I used to know—but how could I doubt? I thought Reino might have changed during all these years.”

“Orvokki—do I look like the Reino whom you remember?”

She looked him straight in the eyes. A faint blush spread over her smoothly rounded cheeks.

“Yes!” she answered softly. “But still—first he came—and then you! One of you must be able to bring the *proof*.”

“*I shall produce it!*”

An idea had suddenly struck him. He saw the proof in his mind’s eye, it couldn’t fail, it was bound to break down all doubts.

“I’ll tell you everything later, Orvokki,” he went on, taking her weakly resisting hands. “Are you going home now?”

“I was on my way home.” All of a sudden she started and looked up the hill where a horseman appeared. “It’s him! Oh, what is he up to now?”

“The same thing as I. He is on his way to the authorities. He will try to get in ahead of me and render me harmless.”

“I’ll rely on you!” she said softly. “You are Reino.”

"Well, go home now—and look out for what's going to happen. When you see a crowd of men coming from the valley along the river, go to the old quarry at the waterfall. We'll meet there."

"Reino!" The name came from her lips without any hesitation. "What are you going to do?"

"I'll provide the proof. Go now, Orvokki. He mustn't see us here together." He pressed her hands and walked on.

Some minutes later the rider, Kaarlo Antikainen, passed him at a brisk trot.

"Sure, go ahead, hurry!" nodded Reino. "You're still ahead of me—but just wait!"

WHEN Reino reached the constable's house, the district judge and a couple of policemen had just arrived. Strange rumors had already spread all over the countryside, and people stood about in crowds discussing the event. Reino felt immediately that the mood of the gathering was decidedly against him, that they considered him either an unusually bold swindler or a lunatic. Kaarlo Antikainen was explaining matters to the judge—an explanation which had been considered thoroughly in all details—for of course he had reckoned with Reino's turning up some day or other. He turned the whole affair upside down, stating convincingly enough that this man who now stepped forward to claim the inheritance had had ample reason to think him—"the legal heir and owner"—dead and gone somewhere in Canada. By means of partly stolen and partly spurious papers he now wanted to take possession of fortune and property.

After having been kept under strict surveillance by the two policemen for about an hour, Reino was called into the room where the case was being examined. All eyes were turned on him. Who was this man?

"I know my position in this case," he began. "I realize that my papers prove nothing, as this man"—he pointed to Kaarlo Antikainen—"also has in his possession documents which verify his iden-

tity as Reino Koljonen just as well as mine."

The judge made an impatient gesture and was going to interrupt.

"I know of only one thing," Reino continued, raising his voice, "which can prove who's who. And this proof is so unequivocal and convincing that it will leave no doubt whatever in the minds of any of the men present here."



"Then produce it!" came the voice of the judge after a short interval of silence.

"Yes, I shall do so—but then it will be necessary for all the people here to follow me, for the court must sit somewhere else, namely, at the spot where it is to be shown which of us is Reino Koljonen and which a ruthless swindler!"

A little while later, the men of authority and a crowd of people from the village walked up through the valley along the river. They passed the bridge leading across to the school building and the houses at the edge of the forest, and farther on toward the waterfall and the old, long-abandoned quarry.

Finally, they reached the place right below the thundering cataract. The crowd halted and looked at Reino in inquisitive anticipation. What was his intention?

Turning to the grave-faced men, Reino immediately began to speak: "Here the evidence is to be procured. Here the one who calls himself Reino Koljonen is to prove that he really is that man, thus delivering the other up to sentence and punishment!"

Kaarlo Antikainen's face had suddenly turned gray.

Reino continued: "The real Reino Koljonen often crossed the river at this spot as a boy. Only very few people knew the path between life and death here. Sometimes a little girl stood on the other bank—Orvokki Rinne was her name—anxiously waiting for the boy. *Now, too, she is waiting for him!* You who call yourself Reino Koljonen and have taken over his inheritance and property"—he had turned directly to Kaarlo—"you shall have the right to cross these eddies first—across to her! If you know the way, you are the one you pretend to be—and I am the swindler."

"He is right!" The old bailiff, one of the few people Reino still recalled, stepped up closer to Reino. "I have seen the boy Reino Koljonen do it—I once even spanked him for his foolhardiness. It is true what this man says: only a few people knew the way across the river here—and the boy Reino was one of them. Indeed, here is the proof!"

A murmur of approval swept through the gathering. They looked at Kaarlo—but the latter had recoiled in intuitive horror. His eyes wandered across the roaring, rushing waters—his eyes shone with the fear of death.

"I won't do it!" he stammered hoarsely. "After so many years! Nobody can expect that!"

"If you won't, I will!" Reino laughed into his face. "Only one of us can do it!"

And suddenly a loud shout rang out in the midst of the confusion. Everybody turned around to the bank of the river. Reino had pulled off his shoes and socks and was already working his way through the foaming waters.

Cautiously, but with sure, unswerving steps, he fought on, now winding around a gurgling whirlpool, now making an abrupt turn upriver close in on the thundering masses of falling water. It was a crossing of life and death—but he knew the way!

A last leap through the seething water, and Reino was safe on the other bank, where Orvokki awaited him with outstretched arms.

"Reino," she whispered, flinging herself into his embrace, "I knew it—I never doubted!"

They turned to the bank and looked across the river. The two policemen were holding Kaarlo Antikainen, who tried to tear himself loose from their grip. The next moment he lay on the ground, overpowered, a prisoner of the law.

